

Alison Van Nyhuis

Fayetteville State University

The American Dream and American Greed in Fanny Fern's Ruth Hall: Sentimental and Satirical Christian Discourse in the Popular Domestic Tale

Although Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall: A Domestic Tale of the Present Time* originally was a widely popular book in the nineteenth century, Fern and *Ruth Hall* were criticized after readers learned about the similarities among Fern's life and book. Contemporary critics have recovered *Ruth Hall* from the literary margins and situated Ruth's story in the context of the popular American dream story while emphasizing the book's satirical elements. Reexamining the novel's originally popular sentimental elements alongside the novel's more recently popular satirical elements expands the literary critical focus from Ruth's sentimental struggles and Fern's satirical accomplishments to *Ruth Hall*'s equally important critique of American greed, especially among wealthy and socially-conscious Christians.

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Mid-nineteenth-century responses to Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* have ranged from tearful praise of Fern's writing to scathing criticism of Fern's intentions. In 1854, New York publishers represented Fern as "the most popular of American writers" and *Ruth Hall* as a best-selling book (*Ruth Hall* 183). *Ruth Hall* became an almost instantly popular book, and multiple editions were published in the United States and Great Britain (F. Adams 10; Allibone 1520; Derby 219; Fatout 282; Hart 94; McGinnis 20; Papashvily 124; Smith xxxiv; Warren, "Introduction" xvii). But readers' initial appreciation of Ruth's sentimental story of familial loss and authorial success turned into scathing criticism after they learned more about Fern. Already in April 1855, *The National Era* printed that "Ruth Hall, in despite of the cruelty of her trials, is a book not to be commended or justified" due to its depiction "of those real persons whom the author of *Ruth Hall* had, under a very thin veil of imaginary names, severely castigated by her wit and satire" (55). Publishers stopped printing Fern's writing after her death in 1872 (Warren, "Sara" 239), and literary critics did not recover *Ruth Hall* from the margins of literary history until the latter half of the twentieth century, when scholars started commending the same literary elements that were condemned by mid-nineteenth-century readers.

Contemporary critics have emphasized the degree to which *Ruth Hall* diverged from other mid-nineteenth-century women's fiction, focusing on the novel's satirical criticism of male behaviour (Berlant 430; Grasso 253; Hiatt 39; Huf 21; Larson 538, 540; Newberry 148; Warren, "Fanny Fern's *Rose Clark*" 101), as well as Ruth's independent socioeconomic advancement in the literary marketplace (Gura 39; Walker 51-62; Warren, *Fanny Fern* 139; Warren, "Legacy Profile" 55-56). A contemporary edition of the novel in the "American Women Writers" series at Rutgers situated Ruth's story in terms of "the American dream" (Warren, "Introduction" xx), a

phrase that historian James Truslow Adams popularized decades later in *The Epic of America* (Adams 31; Cullen 4), and which historically has focused on boys and men (Hearn 4; Long 64; Warren, "Introduction" xx); however, in a more recent Penguin Classics edition, Susan Belasco Smith clarifies that when *Ruth Hall* was published, "[n]o reviewer seems to have considered *Ruth Hall* a novel about the American story of individual success translated into a woman's terms" (xliii). Reexamining the novel's originally popular sentimental elements alongside the novel's more recently popular satirical elements expands the literary critical focus from Ruth's sentimental story and Fern's satirical intentions to *Ruth Hall*'s equally important critique of American greed, especially among wealthy and socially-conscious Christians.

In *Ruth Hall*, Christian discourse sentimentalizes and satirizes characters' romantic, familial, and professional relationships. Jane Tompkins's analysis of another popular mid-nineteenth-century novel, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, equally applies to Fern's *Ruth Hall*: "The figure of Christ is the common term which unites all of the novel's good characters, who are good precisely in proportion as they are imitations of him" (138). In *Ruth Hall*, Biblical allusions, characters' comments, and Ruth's own thoughts, words, and actions consistently represent her as an authentic Christian figure even as others challenge her goodness. The challenges emerge early in *Ruth Hall*, which begins on the eve of Ruth's marriage, especially from wealthy family members who identify as Christians.

Although Ruth marries Harry Hall because she loves him, their families regard their marriage as a business transaction. After Ruth leaves boarding school, her father advises Ruth "either to get married or teach school" (7). Ruth's mother-in-law, Mrs. Hall, similarly considers Ruth and Harry's marriage as a labour arrangement, albeit a flawed one; Mrs. Hall already does the domestic work conventionally performed by a wife. Since Ruth seems ill equipped to fulfil that domestic role, Mrs. Hall references the Bible to remind Ruth that "[w]ives should be keepers at home" (13). Mrs. Hall also uses religion to ridicule Ruth's leisure and question her spirituality, explaining that if Ruth has time to read, then she should do "*rational* reading" about crucial theological matters, such as predestination, rather than read "novels and such trash" (14). In effect, the fiction of "True Womanhood," which according to Nicole Tonkovich, "assumed that women did not stoop to trifle in marketplace exchanges," emerges early in *Ruth Hall* (54): Ruth's marriage clearly straddles the conventionally private domestic sphere and the public professional sphere.

Dr. and Mrs. Hall, who represent themselves as authorities on authentic Christianity, use Christian terms to extend their criticism of Ruth to her entire family. While questioning Ruth's humanity, maturity, and character, Dr. Hall explains to Mr. Ellet, "I don't believe in your doll-baby women; she's proud, you are all proud, all your family – that tells the whole story" (78). In private with Dr. Hall, Mrs. Hall also criticizes Ruth's father as an "avaricious old man" (78). But Dr. Hall identifies Hyacinth as his "*especial* aversion" due to the superficiality of his life and work (83). When Mrs. Hall reminds Dr. Hall that Hyacinth's writing has been received favourably, Dr. Hall still responds critically, saying that Hyacinth describes "The Savior" "as he would a Broadway dandy. That fellow is all surface, I tell you; there's no depth in him. How should there be? Is n't he an Ellet" (83-84)? Although Dr. Hall repeatedly states that their portrayal of the Ellet family members is "the whole story" (51, 71-72, 83, 149, 166, 178), the narrator explicitly and repeatedly refutes the Halls' criticism of Ruth while supporting the Halls' criticism of Ruth's father and brother.

Ruth cherishes marriage, and soon after, motherhood, which the narrator repeatedly describes as a form of sacred authorship: "Joy to thee, Ruth! Another outlet for thy womanly

heart; a mirror, in which thy smiles and tears shall be reflected back; a fair page, on which thou, God-commissioned, mayst write what thou wilt; a heart that will throb back to thine, love for love" (19). The narrator reiterates the sacred and creative significance of Ruth's motherhood later in *Ruth Hall*:

trembling fingers must inscribe, indelibly, on that blank page, characters to be read by the light of eternity: the maternal eye must never sleep at its post, lest the enemy rifle the casket of its gems. And so, by her child's cradle, Ruth first learned to pray. The weight her slender shoulders could not bear, she rolled at the foot of the cross; and, with the baptism of holy tears, mother and child were consecrated. (25)

These melodramatic passages exemplify the novel's sentimentality, align Ruth's story with Christ's story of personal sacrifice for others, and link Ruth's marriage and motherhood to authorship. Ruth's story of romance, marriage, motherhood, and authorship is so compelling because she excels in spite of so many personal challenges, which began in her youth with the death of her mother and extend through her adult years with the deaths of her first-born daughter and her husband, Harry.

After Harry dies from typhus fever, Ruth's father figures, Mr. Ellet and Dr. Hall, recommend that Ruth separate herself from her daughters. In addition, Ruth's father and father-in-law discuss Ruth and her young daughters, Katy and Nettie, as part of Harry's estate, haggling over their respective economic responsibility for Ruth and their granddaughters. Mr. Ellet implies that Ruth entered the care of her husband's wealthy family following their marriage. Dr. Hall reminds Mr. Ellet that Ruth remains Mr. Ellet's daughter, and therefore, he only wishes to "take Harry's *children*" (77-78). Since Mr. Ellet suspects that Ruth will not want to part with her daughters, he appeals to their economic self-interest in order to persuade her to leave Katy and Nettie with the Halls; then he only would have to help support Ruth. But Ruth states that she "can *never* part with [her] children," and her father questions her sanity (80). More specifically, Ruth's father retorts, "Perfect madness," because the Halls possess the economic means to provide Ruth's children with a comfortable country home, food, and education. Mr. Ellet also warns Ruth that if she refuses the Halls' offer and dies, the Halls would no longer take her children.

Despite the cruelty of her father's and father-in-law's responses, Ruth responds with scripture: "Their *Father in Heaven* will"; "He says, 'Leave thy fatherless children with me'" (80). In contrast to the primary patriarchal figures in the novel, and in accordance with her "*Father in Heaven*," Ruth views her children as valuable people rather than as economic liabilities. The Biblical source of Ruth's motherly convictions substantiates her criticism of her father and supersedes her father-in-law's recommendations. Although Mr. Ellet states that Ruth's scriptural explanation for caring for her daughters is "[p]erversion of Scripture, perversion of Scripture," the narrator clarifies that it was Mr. Ellet who was "foiled with his own weapons" (80). In other words, both Ruth and the narrator clearly use scripture to sentimentalize good behaviour, such as maintaining mother/daughter relationships despite economic hardships, and to criticize bad behaviour, such as rupturing father/daughter relationships due to economic costs.

Although Ruth eventually wins the verbal battle regarding maintaining her maternal right to care for her daughters, Mr. Ellet and Dr. Hall are more motivated by the social consequences of their actions than Ruth's Biblical convictions. After Dr. Hall learns that villagers have been discussing Dr. Hall's lack of support of Ruth, Nettie, and Katy, Dr. Hall uses Nettie's and Katy's appearance to question his biological connection with them in order to argue that Mr. Ellet should take more responsibility for Ruth, Nettie, and Katy. But Mr. Ellet and Dr. Hall eventually agree

to economically support Ruth in order to prevent future criticism of their actions from “church members” (85). Although the fathers verbally agree to equally support Ruth, Nettie, and Katy in order to maintain their public image as upstanding Christians, Mr. Ellet refuses to put their agreement in writing, because “parchments, lawyers, witnesses, and things, make [him] nervous” (86). In other words, Ruth’s wealthier Christian family members seem much more comfortable with legal documents and procedures when they are used to secure their own desires than when they are used to protect Ruth’s rights.

Contemporary scholars have focused on *Ruth Hall*’s criticism of this kind of cruel, greedy, and exploitative male behaviour; however, Fern similarly criticizes women who value appearances and social status more than people. Ruth’s familiarity with “common female employments and recreations” during her earlier years at boarding school and her loss of access to these social activities after Harry’s death results in Ruth’s female acquaintances’ and family members’ strategic disassociation from Ruth in order to maintain business profits and social status (56). After Ruth seeks employment as a seamstress to support herself and her daughters, Mrs. Slade, an acquaintance of Ruth’s former school friend, refuses to hire Ruth for the following reason: “she never employed any of those persons who ‘had seen better days,’ that somehow she could n’t drive as good a bargain with them as she could with a common person, who was ignorant of the value of their labor” (97-98). Whereas Mrs. Slade only allows historically poor women to work in her business in order to maximize her profits, one of Ruth’s former acquaintances admits that she “can’t keep up her acquaintance” with Ruth due to Ruth’s lower social position (99). Ruth’s former acquaintance, Mary, also defends Hyacinth’s disassociation from Ruth: “Hyacinth has just married a rich, fashionable wife, and of course he cannot lose caste by associating with Ruth now; you cannot blame him” (100). While standing outside of Ruth’s house, Mary admits to another of Ruth’s former acquaintances, Gertrude, that Ruth’s well-being “is clearly none of our business.” Rather than visit with Ruth, Mary and Gertrude discuss fashion and shopping and leave Ruth’s house to visit a saloon. Although Gertrude at least seems to sympathize with Ruth, none of these wealthier women make a significant effort to use their power and resources to meaningfully help Ruth and her daughters.

Whereas *Ruth Hall* satirizes the ways in which wealthy men and women disassociate themselves from Ruth after Harry’s death, it also sentimentalizes the ways in which working-class men and women consistently help those in need while asking nothing in return. Ruth’s former employee, Johnny Galt, visits after she moves from the country to the city, and he comes bearing gifts of apples and flowers. A male stranger in her working-class neighbourhood offers medical assistance when he notices her daughter’s illness. Ruth’s nursery maid offers to accompany Ruth without pay after Harry’s death. Other working-class women who learn of Ruth’s poverty and her relatives’ wealth sympathize with Ruth rather than her relatives. As Nancy A. Walker has explained, *Ruth Hall* “carries with it an implicit set of values that favors the working poor over the ideal upper class” (56). Indeed, working-class men and women repeatedly treat Ruth better than her wealthier family members and acquaintances, who are repeatedly depicted and described as “stony-hearted” (101), “calloused by selfishness” (104), and “heartless” (205, 231).

Ruth’s movement from her secluded country home to a more densely populated urban migrant neighbourhood increases her alienation from wealthy American society and her solidarity with the working class, especially working women. After Ruth observes “gray-haired men, business men, substantial-looking family men, and foppish-looking young men” and “half-grown boys” visit sex workers in her working-class neighbourhood, she tearfully compares their

circumstances: "She knew now how it could be, when every door of hope seemed shut, by those who make long prayers and wrap themselves in morality as with a garment, and cry with closed purses and averted faces, 'Be ye warmed, and filled'" (112). Ruth's sympathy for the female sex workers in her new neighbourhood cultivates readers' sympathy for Ruth, and by extension, Fern, at a time when female authors were associated with whores. As Lara Langer Cohen has explained in a discussion of Fern's writing that compares nineteenth-century American female authors with British female authors of this period, they "'did not enter an inappropriately male territory, but a degradingly female one' organized by 'the metaphor of the author as a whore'" (Gallagher 39-40 qtd. in Cohen 62). Ruth's complicated authorial history gestures towards her awareness of the negative connotations of paid female authors.

Although Ruth had been writing successfully for most of her life, she only pursued a writing career after more conventionally feminine options failed. As a young girl, Ruth would "right" Hyacinth's papers (4), in boarding school, she wrote her peers' papers (6), and as a young wife, she wrote poetry at home (29). Susan K. Harris has argued that Ruth's entrance into the working class "free[d] her from the gender definitions and restrictions of the middle and upper middle classes. For the heroines of these [women's] novels [of the mid-nineteenth century], such freedom and consequent self-definition comes only in isolation, in the *lack* of protection by others" (621). But after Harry's death, Ruth initially sought gendered work according to her perceived social "capital" and connections rather than her authorial skills and desires, such as by requesting to sew parts of women's clothing for old acquaintances and applying to teach at a primary school where her cousin served on the school committee (96, 122). Both of these positions only were filled by women: "girls" completed the sewing (96), and "ladies" applied for the teaching position (129). Ruth only actively pursued a writing career after she failed to earn these gendered positions vis-à-vis her social connections.

Shortly after she learned that her "dear" friend, Mrs. Mary Leon, died alone in an insane asylum (139), Ruth strategically negotiates publishing her writing to provide for herself and her daughters. As an impoverished mother and aspiring author, Ruth first consults her brother, who has literary connections as the editor of *The Irving Magazine*. But Hyacinth recommends that Ruth "seek some *unobtrusive* employment" (147), as if Ruth's ideas should not be made public through writing, and then he refuses to help her publish her writing. Meanwhile, when Dr. and Mrs. Hall realize that Ruth and their granddaughters hardly have enough money for food and clothes, they resume manipulative strategies to separate Ruth from her daughters. Mrs. Hall, for example, invites Katy to visit their home "for a week or two" and then informs Mr. Ellet that Ruth had decided to let them raise Katy and Nettie in their country home (150). Although Mr. Ellet supports the Halls' plan, which apparently would stop his economic support of his granddaughters, Ruth feels deceived. Ruth's wealthier Christian family members repeatedly choose bolstering their social position and advancing their own economic interests over the desires of Ruth and her daughters.

Ruth responds to her family members' lack of support by looking for more work, including at *The Daily Type* and the *Parental Guide* (153). After being rejected at both offices, "she knew that to climb, she must begin at the lowest round of the ladder" (155). Although Ruth's path to literary success in *Ruth Hall* is difficult, it is purposeful and situated in relationship to Christ's own suffering and ascension, such as when Ruth attends church with her daughter, Nettie: "The bliss, the joy of heaven was pictured; life, – mysterious, crooked, unfathomable life, made clear to the eye of faith; sorrow, pain, suffering, ignominy even, made sweet for His sake, who suffered all for us" (156). In *Ruth Hall*, short heartwrenching scenes of Ruth and her

daughters struggling to survive at home are juxtaposed with Ruth's family acting generously with others to maintain their positive public image.

For example, shortly after Ruth's father invites a clergyman into his home and serves him a lavish meal, the clergyman tells Mr. Ellet, "You have, I bless God, a warm heart and a liberal one; your praise is in all the churches," and Mr. Ellet "uttered an usually lengthy grace" (159). The narrator's commentary paired with the following scene demonstrates that Mr. Ellet is performing a generous role for his Christian community even as he neglects his own family; the chapter concludes with these words from Ruth's daughter, "'Some more supper, please, Mamma,' vainly pleaded little Nettie" (159). This narrative technique of pairing wealthy Christians' pious performances with their family members' real needs exposes Ruth's family members as hypocrites and conveys a Biblical message for an even broader audience: "You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Matt. 7.5). Over the course of the novel, the artificiality of Ruth's wealthy Christian family and acquaintances emerges as part of a larger pattern of patriarchy in mid-nineteenth-century America.

In the literary marketplace, Ruth negotiates what Nina Baym describes as a "man's game" (253) according to Christian principles with two strikingly different editors while she publishes her increasingly popular writing under the pseudonym Floy. Ruth's first editor at *The Standard* exudes the individualistic economic greed that Ruth criticizes throughout the novel. Mr. Lescom refuses to give Ruth an advance or increase her pay even though her writing substantially increases the paper's subscribers. *The Standard's* title associates Mr. Lescom's business practices with standard editorial practice during the era of emerging mass-market capitalism (Harer 7). After Ruth's manuscript was accepted at *The Standard*, Ruth walks from the city to the country to reclaim Katy (166).

While caring for her daughters and publishing in *The Standard*, the editor at *The Household Messenger* writes Floy because he values her "genius" and her writing as "a wail from her inmost soul" (180). Ruth resigns from *The Standard* and accepts Mr. Walter's offer to write exclusively for *The Household Messenger* because of his "warm, brotherly interest," his "respectful" tone towards her, and his paper's editorials, which were "always on the side of the weak, and on the side of truth" (184-85). Ruth responds to Mr. Walter's letter with "a long letter – a sweet, sisterly letter – pouring out her long pent-up feelings, as though Mr. Walter had indeed been her brother, who, having been away ever since before Harry's death, had just returned, and consequently, had known nothing about her cruel sufferings" (186). The familial terms of their literary relationship indicate a much more equitable distribution of power than Ruth experienced at *The Standard*. Ruth also earns substantially more money writing exclusively for *The Household Messenger* than she earned writing more articles for *The Standard*.

Ruth Hall's readers learn the most about Floy's writing through letters from her readers, which are included with Ruth's responses rather than her articles. In a section of *Ruth Hall* that includes multiple letters from Floy's readers, who range from men like the editor Mr. Walter to a young girl, *Ruth Hall's* readers also are directly addressed as possibly writing "in a delicate, beautiful, female hand; just such an one as you, dear Reader, might trace, whose sweet, soft eyes, and long, drooping tresses, are now bending over this page" (174). The logic, authenticity, and success of Floy's writing as well as her intellect, business acumen, and character are reoccurring themes in the letters to Floy, such as requests from male and female readers of varying ages for Floy to publish a book (173), speculations of Floy's expected literary wealth (200), and a request from an orphaned mother that Floy raise her child (212-13). In *Ruth Hall*, the pseudonym Floy

frees Ruth to write openly about her hardships in order to provide for herself and her daughters and emphasizes that her writing is judged by its quality rather than her literary and social connections.

Whereas Ruth initially disregarded readers' recommendations to publish a book because her "articles were written for bread and butter, not fame; and tossed to the printer before the ink was dry, or I had time for a second reading" (174), Ruth more seriously considers readers' recommendations when she receives two unsolicited offers from publishers to publish her articles as a book (197). One of these publishers offers Ruth \$800 in copyright money, which she could use to support herself and her children; however, Ruth rejects this offer for a percentage of book sales (197-98). Michael Newbury clarifies the legal and economic significance of this decision: "Ruth chooses to maintain her copyright—what this novel understands as the full and adequate ownership of her property—and through this copyright becomes a woman of independent means beyond the power of exploitative publishers, family, and any others who might show her disrespect" (193). In other words, Ruth's legal knowledge of domestic and professional issues grows significantly following her husband's death.

Fern's critique of the individualist and patriarchal elements of romantic, familial, and sexual relations extends beyond the literary marketplace to academia. Shortly after Ruth decides to publish her writing as a book, she receives a letter addressed to Floy from William Stearns, a college professor and author, who admits, "The rest of the world flatters you – I shall do no such thing" (213). Stearns explains why in a lengthy and critical letter of females' intelligence, where he admits, "that it is my opinion, that the *female* mind is incapable of producing anything which may be strictly termed *literature*" (213). This chapter concludes with Ruth's light-hearted response, "Oh vanity! thy name is William Stearns" (214), and the next chapter begins with a medical refutation of Stearns' analysis. Following Mr. Walter's encouragement, Ruth undergoes a "phrenological examination" (215), in which a different professor shares the following assessment: "In conclusion, I will remark, that very much might be said with reference to the operations of your mind, for we seldom find the faculties so fully developed, or the powers so versatile as in your case" (220), demonstrating the systematic inclusion and refutation of the criticism of Ruth, and by extension, all female authors.

Ruth Hall similarly exposes and deconstructs binary conceptions of "private and public spheres," which Mary Kelley has reconsidered in *Private Woman, Public Stage*, since "the boundaries are far more porous than the binary category allows" (xii). Although María C. Sánchez has concluded that Ruth's literary success results in her "isolation, ostracism, abandonment," and this, the "narrative of what fails," "represents a truly separate sphere" (51), the narrator describes Ruth as "our heroine" and "a regular business woman" when Ruth finalizes the edits of her first book, *Life Sketches*, and corresponds with her editor and publisher at home while caring for her youngest daughter, Nettie (Fern 223). When *Life Sketches* is published, Ruth's literary work also is inextricably tied to her domestic life as a mother: "Little shoeless feet were covered with the proceeds of this; a little medicine, or a warmer shawl was bought with that. . . . One [article] was written with little Nettie sleeping her lap" (225). The narrator's description of Ruth as "our heroine" and "a regular business woman" while mothering at home signifies the normalization of women and domesticity in the conventionally male-dominated and public literary marketplace (223).

Throughout the novel, Ruth excels in conventionally private and public spheres despite cruel criticism, and she performs her domestic and authorial roles according to Christian principles. Even after Ruth learns that strong sales are expected for her book, Ruth's in-laws

continue to threaten to separate Ruth from her children, whom they still treat as their property. Dr. Hall tells Ruth, "The law says if the mother can't support her children, the grandparents shall do it" (238). Ruth continues to speak and work for her daughters, clarifying that "[t]he mother *can* – the mother *will*," before leaving the Halls' country home with her daughters. After Mrs. Hall, who her husband affirms is the "master in this house," decides to ban Ruth from their home (237-38), she praises Floy's "common-sense" and calls her a "good writer" before learning that Ruth wrote *Life Sketches* (260-61). Ruth's faithful pursuit of Christian principles facilitates her success with her family and career; she successfully uses her domestic and professional knowledge to voice and secure her maternal and literary rights.

Ruth even maintains her authentic Christian identity after she achieves socioeconomic success as the popular writer Floy. As her editor, Mr. Walters, tells another gentleman surprised by Ruth's humble response to Floy's success: "'Floy' knows every phase of the human heart; she knows that she was none the less worthy because poor and unrecognized; she knows how much of the homage now paid her is due to the *showy setting* of the gem; therefore, she takes all these things at their true valuation" (247). After Mr. Walter learned of Floy's true identity as Ruth Hall, he describes Ruth's story as religious allegory, explaining that Ruth has moved through "gloomy valleys," "the promised land" and "the Dead Sea." In this Judeo-Christian context, "true valuation" refers to the sacred valuation of love and people over the secular valuation of money and self-interest. As Stephen Hartnett clarifies, *Ruth Hall* "illustrates in a uncannily precise manner what Friedrich Von Schiller recognized in *Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* as one of the driving impulses of sentimental fiction: to envision 'the complete reconciliation of all opposition between actuality and ideal'" (12). In *Ruth Hall*, Ruth consistently acts in the loving interest of her daughters, and in the concluding sentence, Mr. Walter gestures towards even more familial, literary, and economic success for Ruth: "Life has much of harmony yet in store for you" (272). *Ruth Hall* originally achieved such widespread popularity because Ruth remains a good Christian throughout the novel and despite challenges.

In *Ruth Hall*, Fern offers authentic Christian love as a means to improve the physical, emotional, economic, and social conditions of romantic, familial, and professional relationships. If Ruth's mother-in-law loved Ruth as a daughter rather than as a hired domestic servant for her son, then Ruth would have been much freer within the Halls' home. If Mary's husband would have treated her as a desirable and valuable human being rather than as a piece of property, then she might not have died alone in an insane asylum. If wealthy employers paid their employees a living wage, then working-class women might not feel the economic need to heighten their risk of gender-based violence by selling sex. In *Ruth Hall*, Fern repeatedly exposes the injustices of these romantic, familial, and professional relationships to reform them. Furthermore, Fern represents the humanization and equalization of romantic, familial relationships, and professional relationships as a Christian process. Like early American feminists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott (Askeland 180-81), Fern uses Christian discourse to represent equal access to legal rights and fair wages as God's will for men and women, regardless of social class (Stanton and Mott 829).

More fully acknowledging, analyzing, and embracing *Ruth Hall*'s more sentimental aspects, such as Ruth's romance, motherhood, and melodramatic Christian discourse, creates a more meaningful American dream story of individual economic advancement, which both sentimentalizes equitable relationships at home and work and satirizes American greed and artificiality, especially among wealthy Christians. Although Ruth's story of socioeconomic advancement in the literary marketplace contributed to its resurgence as a popular American book

and even an exemplary American dream story, *Ruth Hall* is not inherently good because Ruth achieved the American dream of independent socioeconomic advancement.

On the contrary, Ruth's story of literary success is so good, and originally was so popular, because she holds true to Christian principles while pursuing personal, professional, and social goals through her published writing. As Fern writes in the concluding sentence of her preface to the reader, "I cherish the hope that, somewhere in the length and breadth of the land, it may fan into a flame, in some tired heart, the fading embers of hope, well-nigh extinguished by wintry fortune and summer friends." From the very beginning, *Ruth Hall* is inspirational as well as aspirational for readers, especially female readers, whom the narrator directly addresses in the novel (174). *Ruth Hall* shares Ruth's struggles as a daughter, wife, mother, friend, sister, and author to criticize bad behaviour, especially greed and artificiality, and to inspire better behaviour, ranging from reconsidering the value of women's Christian convictions regarding romance, marriage, motherhood, and authorship to equally executing the law and paying fair wages.

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